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INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/WHITE HOUSE NSC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L JERUSALEM 002273

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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE, NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/06/2016  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KWBG](#) [KPAL](#) [KDEM](#) [IS](#)  
SUBJECT: ABBAS APPOINTS NEW WEST BANK COMMANDER OF FORCE-17

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, per reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Embassy Tel Aviv has cleared this cable.

¶1. (C) Summary. Palestinian President Abbas (Abu Mazen) appointed Mahmud Damra to head the West Bank contingent of Force-17, a security force under the president's exclusive authority. Damra is suspected by the GOI of involvement in several lethal attacks against Israelis, including one that resulted in the deaths of Amcits Binyamin Kahane and his wife Talia in 2000. Advisers to Abu Mazen told USSC LTG Dayton that Abu Mazen appointed Damra because he considers him to be loyal and effective, and that the GOI had not objected to the appointment. End summary.

Abu Mazen Picks Damra  
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¶2. (C) During the week of May 29, Abu Mazen appointed Mahmud Damra to head Force-17 in the West Bank. Force-17 is an approx. 3,000-man security force in the WB/G established by Arafat in the 1970s that remains under the exclusive control of the president. At the same time, Abu Mazen removed Faisal Abu Sharkh -- an Arafat crony who had poor relations with Abu Mazen -- as overall head of Force-17. According to advisers in Abu Mazen's office, Abu Mazen considers Damra, who would lead the approx. 1,500 individuals who comprise Force-17 in the West Bank, effective and loyal and wants to use him to build up the force for possible use in connection with the planned referendum.

¶3. (C) While Israeli press reports characterized Force-17 as part of the Presidential Guard (PG), PG Commanding Officer for the West Bank COL Yusef Munir told USSC representatives in late April that the PG and the Force-17 have always been two distinct entities, each reporting directly to the president.

Damra's Past  
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¶4. (C) Damra comes from the ranks of Force-17. As commander of the Ramallah branch of Force-17, Damra went into hiding following Israel's re-occupation of the West Bank in ¶2002. Along with other PA security officials such as West Bank Mukhabarat Chief Tawfiq Tirawi, Damra sought refuge from the IDF in Chairman Arafat's Ramallah compound. (Note: According to the Jerusalem Post, the GOI had linked Damra to terrorist attacks, including the December 2000 killing of Amcits Binyamin Kahane -- son of Rabbi Meir Kahane, founder of the Jewish Defense League and the Israeli extremist group "Kach," who was assassinated in 1990 in New York City -- and his wife Talia as they traveled by car in the West Bank. End note.)

15. (C) According to sources in the president's office, Abu Mazen obtained assurances in February 2005 from then-Israeli Defense Minister Mofaz that Damra could resume his role as Ramallah commander of Force-17, provided that Damra remained in Ramallah and did not attempt to travel to Gaza or abroad. Damra has since operated openly in Ramallah, and has undertaken a number of missions on behalf of the PA president. For example, Damra reportedly intervened on behalf of Abu Mazen earlier this year when al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades gunmen attempted to take over the PLC building in Ramallah.

GOI Acquiescence?

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16. (C) Given the allegations against Damra, LTG Dayton raised U.S. concerns regarding Damra's appointment in a June 1 meeting with presidential adviser on security matters Abu Hisham. Abu Hisham voiced surprise, claiming that the appointment had been cleared by the GOI in advance, and that the GOI fully understood the rationale for the appointment. According to Abu Hisham, Abu Mazen has asked the GOI to remove the prohibitions against Damra's movement outside of Ramallah.

WALLES